

# Exploring political blogs as a form of alternative media

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“Reading a blog is like listening to the opinions of a drunk at a bar, but without the benefit of a drink.”

-Jennifer Darnley

# Journalism

- Examines proximate topics that involve prominent individuals and have broad effects  
(MacDougall & Reid, 1987)
- Cultural institution constantly in flux (Williams, 1977) Considering both...
  - News beats, organizational routines
  - Manufactured representation of an elite ideology  
(Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Tuchman, 1978)

# New Journalism

- Following trend of alternative media histories
- Opinionated, stylized reporting (Hartsock, 2000)
- Emerged in 60s as response to mainstream failures in Vietnam
- Possible precursor to modern political current events blog (Wall, 2005)



# Blogs as New Journalism

- Emergent during Iraq War and President George Bush  
(Herring et al., 2005)
- Gained stature in response to entertainment and sensationalism of mainstream news  
(Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000)
- Provides alternative approach to current events from mainstream media  
(Atton, 2004)

# Blogs

- 1999: about 50 blogs  
(Johnson et. al., 2007)
- 2004: Readership and authorship of political current events blogs exceeds political print magazines and columns  
(Mayfield, 2004)
- 2007: 8 out of 10 Americans knew what a blog was and almost half of America accessed blogs  
(Synovate, 2007)

# Blogs

- Vast influence in politics  
(Bahnisch, 2006; Trammell, 2006)
- Rise of Howard Dean  
(Stomer-Galley & baker, 2006)
- Resignation of CNN Eason Jordan  
(Seeyle, 2005)
- Resignation of Senator Trent Lott  
as Majority Leader  
(Bowman & Willis, 2003)
- Resignation of CBS News  
Dan Rather  
(Glaser, 2004)



# Blogs

- More dynamic than static website
- Frequently updated postings in reverse order
- Easy to construct and flexible  
(Herring et. al. 2005)
- Depend upon hyperlinks
  - Brings attention to blog & provides information to reader
  - Possibility of self-referential echo chamber  
(Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005)



# Alternative media

- Hard to categorize  
(Downing, 2003)
- Produced by noncommercial sources  
(Atton, 2006)
- Attempt to transform existing social roles/routines
- Critique and challenge power structure
- Construct different social order, traditions, values  
and social understandings  
(Hamilton, 2000)

# Defining 'alternative'?

- Platform for marginalized individuals  
(Atton, 2002)
- Social critique of capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, nature of corporations
- Advocate social change through politicized social commentary  
(Armstrong, 1981; Duncombe, 1997)
- Aligned with social movements  
(Grace, 1985; Santa Cruz, 1995)

# What is 'alternative'?

- Goal to “subvert the hierarchy of access”  
(Atton, 2002)
- Emphasize first person participant accounts
- Mutually collective and anti-hierarchical  
(Atton, 2003)
- Radical civic journalism
- Resistance narratives focused on political institutions and corporate power  
(Atkinson, 2003)



# What is 'alternative'?

- Facilitate democratic participation
- Encourage cultural disruption  
(Makagon, 2000)
- Solicit feedback in egalitarian relationship  
(Rodriguez, 2001)
- Fills the “gap” of mainstream media  
(Downing, 2001)



# Blogs as 'alternative'

- Interactive and allow viewers to post comments  
(Lenhart & Fox, 2006)
- Individual citizens can potentially reach wide audience  
(Blood, 2002)
- Possibility for two-way conversation  
(Viegas, 2005)
- Available for open access  
(Lenhart & Fox, 2006)



# Blogs as ‘alternative’

- A space to reflect on “deluge of data”  
(Blood, 2002)
- No constraints of censure or advertising pressures
- Strongly opinionated (even vitriolic)  
(Johnson & Kaye, 2004)
- Most rooted in  
personal disclosure  
(Lenhart & Fox, 2006)



# Blogs as 'alternative'

- An alternative to mainstream news  
(Haas, 2005)
- No corporate sponsors or gatekeepers  
(Lasica, 2002)
- Signal the end of journalism's sovereign reign  
(Rosen, 2005)
- Long-awaited answer to journalism's weaknesses  
(Regan, 2003)
- A new alternative "amateur journalism"  
(Lasica, 2003)

# Blogs as 'alternative'

- Offer a “radically different kind of news” than mainstream  
(Haas, 2005)
- Draw from a array of diverse sources to create an activist space  
(Bruns, 2003; Matheson, 2004)
- Emphasize personalization and audience participation  
(Wall, 2005)





# Hypotheses & R. Question

- H1: Political news blogs will link to alternative news sources more than to mainstream news sources
- H2: Political news blogs will link to opposite-minded blogs more than they link to like-minded blogs.
- H3: Political news blogs will link to unofficial sources more than to official sources
- R1: Are the political current event blogs sampled in this study a form of alternative media?

# Method

- Content analysis
  - Deductive
- Critical discourse analysis
  - Options of lexical choices
  - Networks of identity and power
  - Benefactors and effects of discourse
  - Interdependencies between textual, discursive and social practices

# Method

- Random sampling of blogs not possible
- [Tailrank](#)
  - Memetracker measuring “linking behavior, text of post, links in common with other users, text relevance, weblog ranking, past performance...”
  - Top 100 posts for one week
    - Selected two from “hottest” and “coldest”
    - Overwhelming liberal perspectives

# Method

- Seven day sample from:
  - [Think Progress](#)  
(Technorati Authority ranking 6,314)
  - [Crooks and Liars](#)  
(Technorati Authority ranking 4,544)
  - [Oliver Willis](#)  
(Technorati Authority ranking 708)
  - [The Osterley Times](#)  
(Technorati Authority ranking 135)

# Results

- 1,712 hyperlinks
  - Think Progress: 828
  - Crooks and Liars: 565
  - Oliver Willis: 215
  - Osterley Times: 104

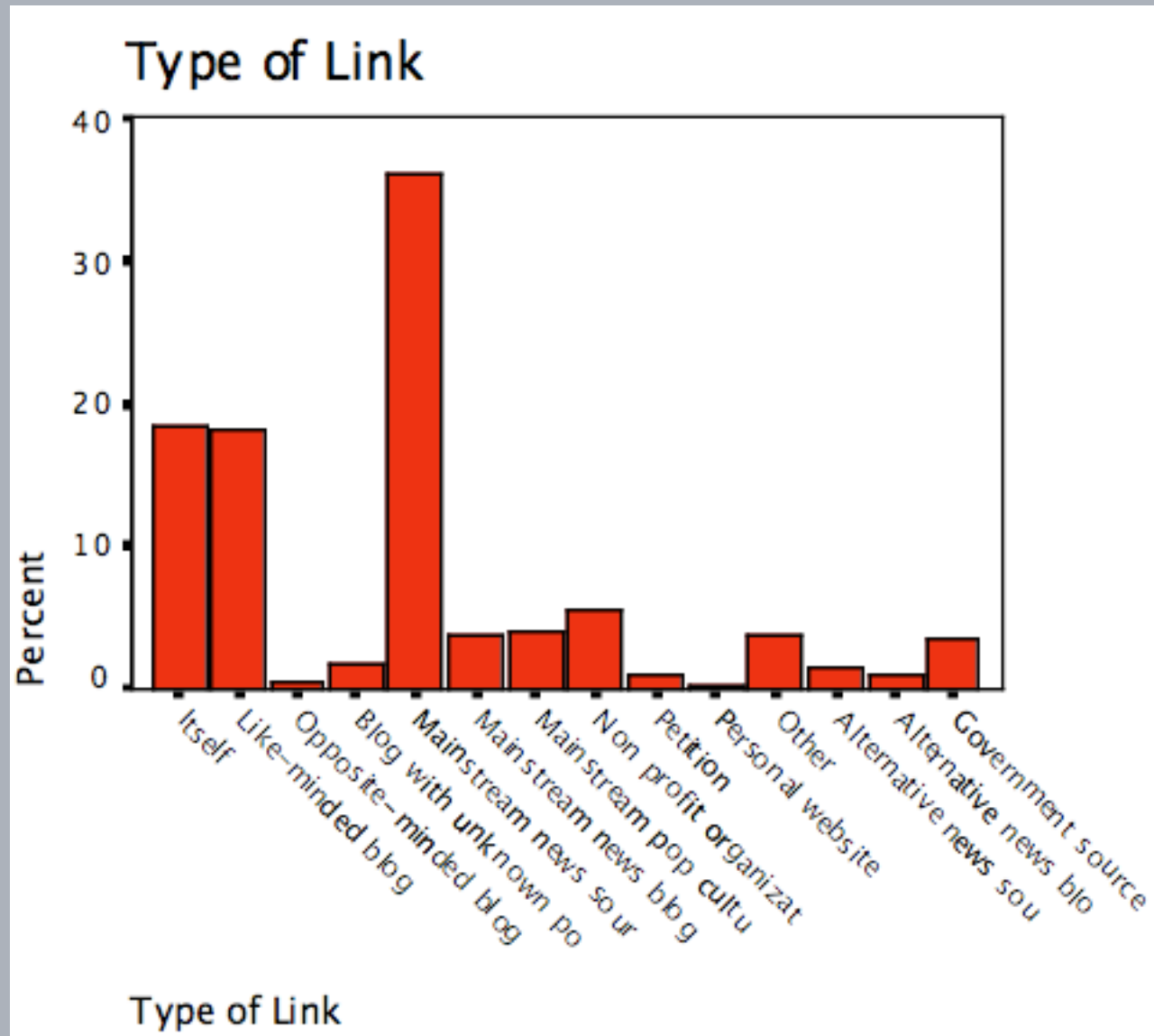
# Results

- 344 Posts
  - Think Progress: 144
  - Crooks and Liars: 112
  - Oliver Willis: 57
  - Osterley Times: 31

# Results

- 10,401 comments
  - Think Progress: 11,778 (81.79 per post)
  - Crooks and Liars: 10,401 (92.86 per post)
  - Oliver Willis: 883 (28.48 per post)
  - Osterley Times: 19 (.33 per post)

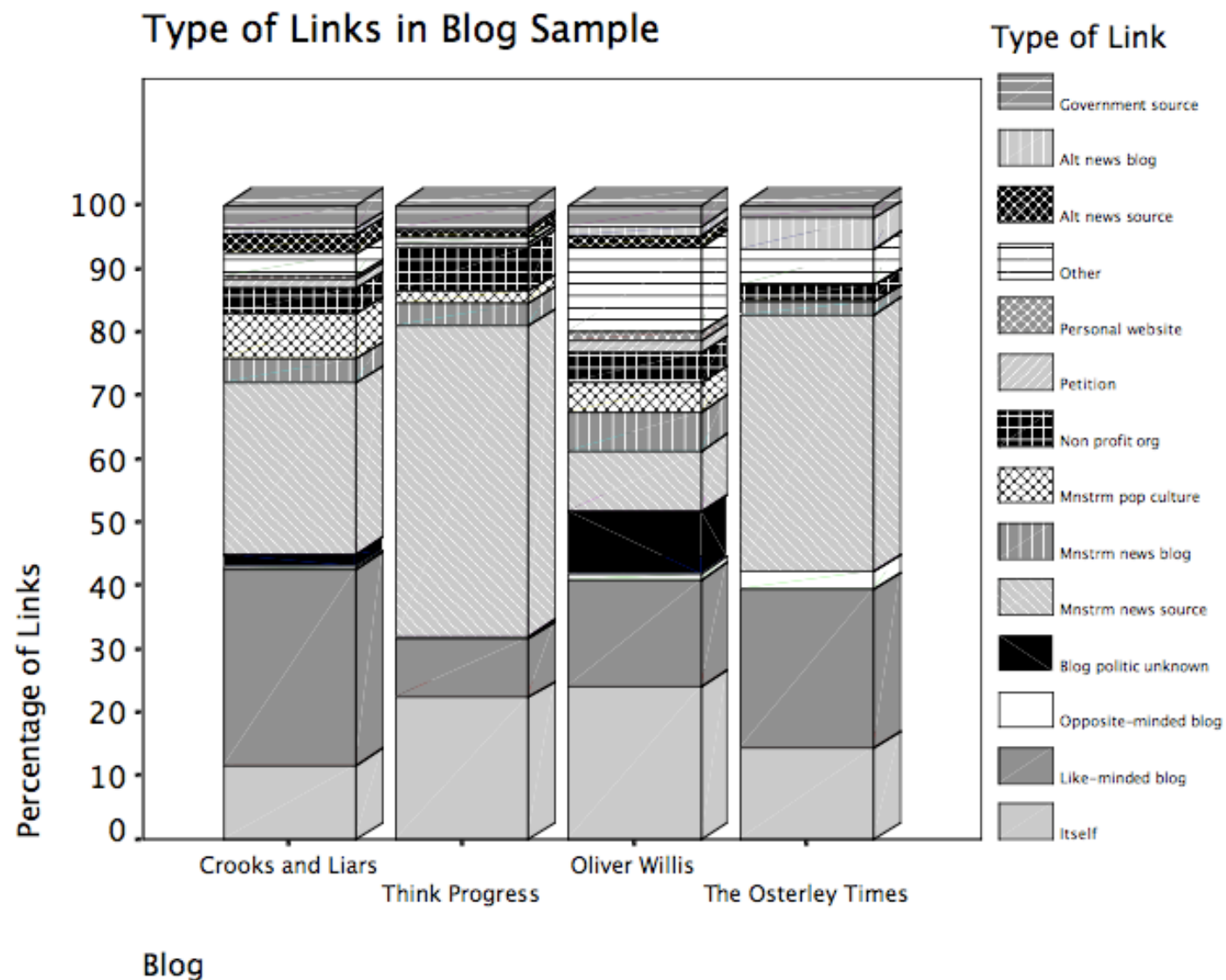
# Results



H1: Political news blogs will link to alternative news sources more than to mainstream news  
**REJECTED**



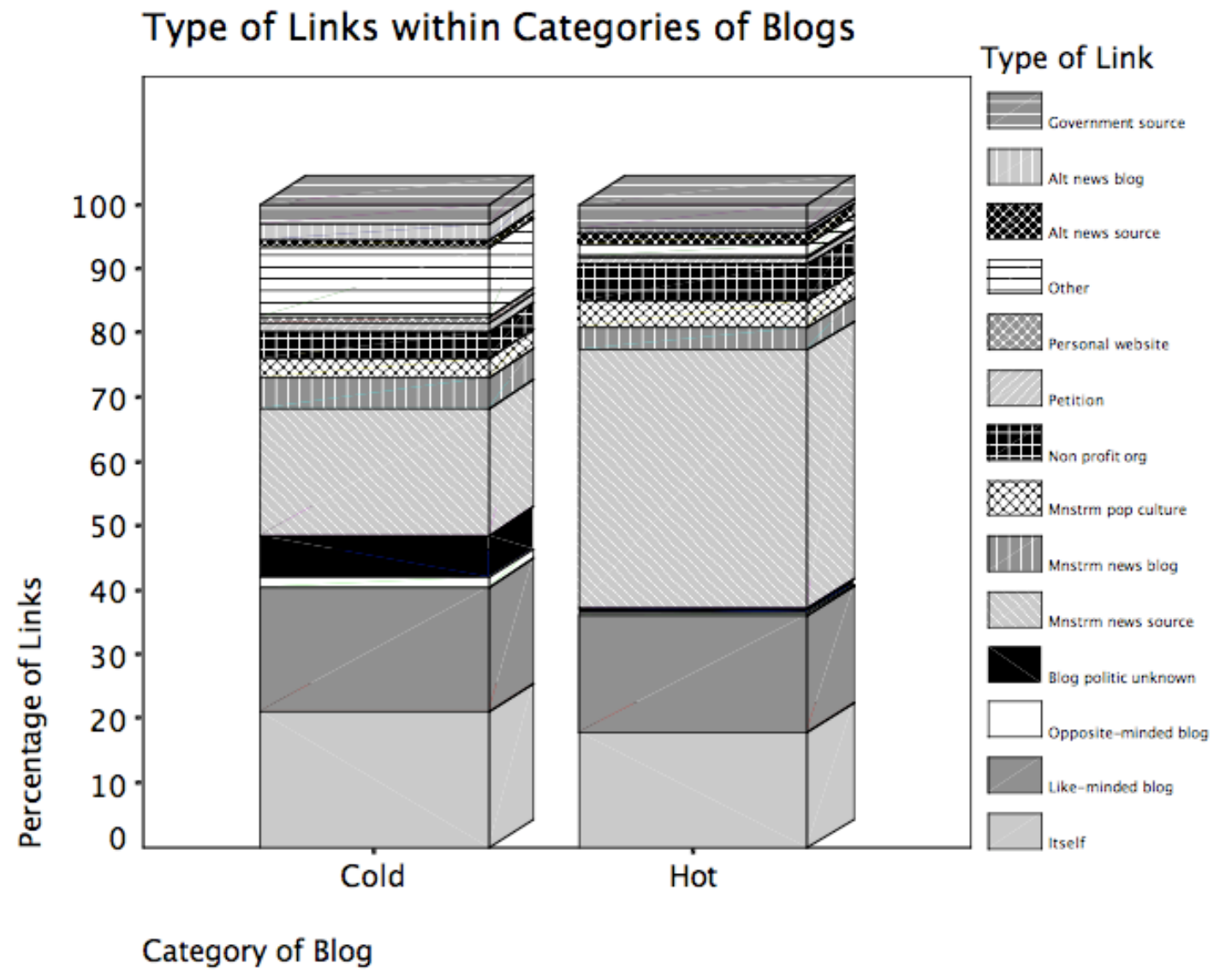
# Results



## H2: Political news blogs will link to opposite-minded blogs more than they link to like-minded blogs.

# REJECTED

# Results



H3: Political news blogs will link to unofficial sources more than to official sources

**REJECTED**

# Results

- Mainstream associations
  - structure connections between sites  
(Foot et. al., 2003)
  - links are non random and build purposeful socio-epistemic networks  
(Rogers & Marres, 2002)
  - viewer infers association between producers  
(Adamic & Adar, 2001)
  - links represent relationships
  - perceived connections extend to off-line locations  
(Hine, 2000)

# Results

- Mainstream associations
  - Found strong, yet critical, relationship with mainstream news
  - Association with mainstream grew as blogs became “hotter”
  - Alternative news links (1.1%) might have different, regenerative and multiplying effect in social communication
  - Mainstream and political blogs have mutually dependent relationship with each other

# Results

- Binary, reductive analysis
  - Text constructed incredulously to emphasize division between 'sides'
  - Oliver Willis:  
“Drill Now?!?”
- Text constructed as a dualistic battle with like-minded majority  
“The death of conventional wisdom by a thousand cuts”

# Results

- Binary, reductive analysis
  - Text constructs distance between opposition through ridicule
  - Oliver Willis

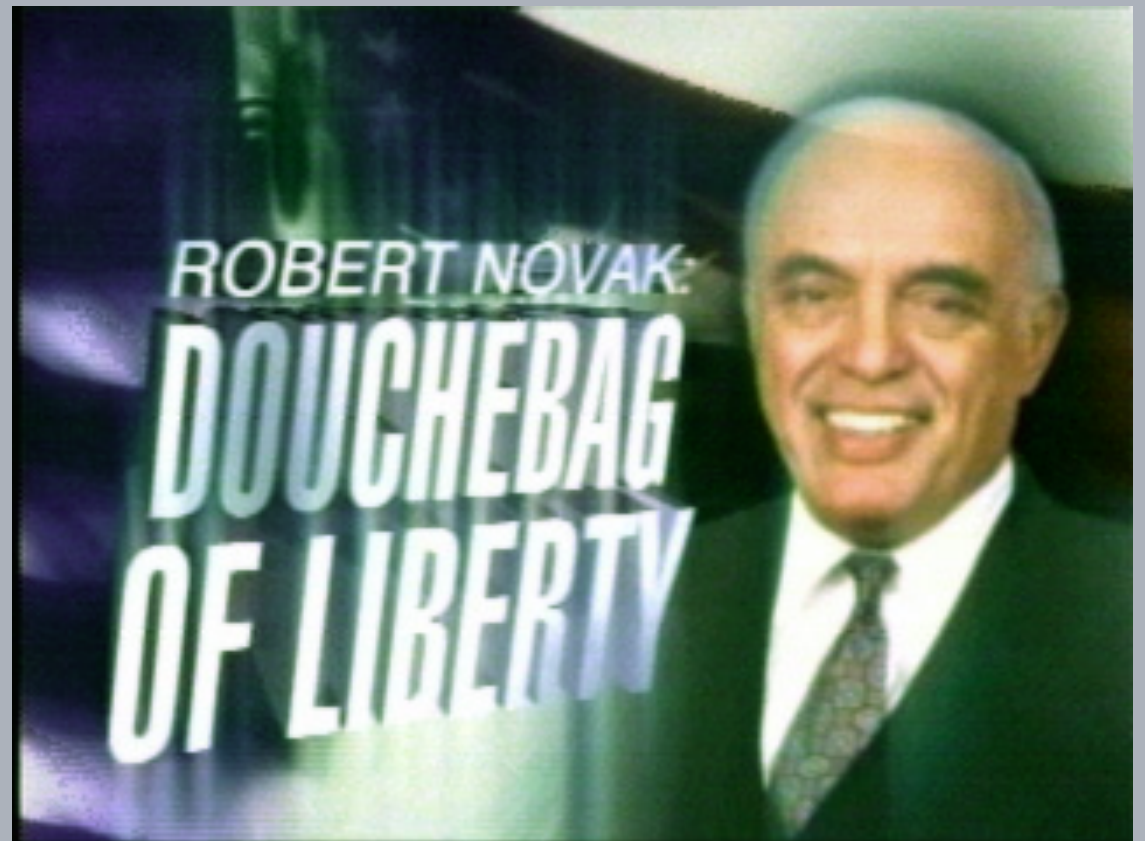
“Someone forgot their Centrum Silver again...John McCain bitching about someone else supposedly getting preferential media coverage is sort of like attacking Jeffrey Dahmer for cruelty to animals and ignoring the other stuff. Seriously. This guy.”

# Results

- Binary, reductive analysis
- Text constructs absolutist, binary approach
  - Crooks and Liars  
Quickly repudiate without context and change focus
    - Consider if linked with independent reporting on impact of affirmative action
- Think Progress  
“There is *no doubt* that Doan has first hand experience with leadership that doesn’t work”

# Results

- Binary, reductive analysis
  - Text overstates claims to 'truth' and undermining opponents attempt to do the same





# Results

- One-way communication
  - Only one clear solicitation for input
  - Only Crooks and Liars had 'open threads'
  - No direct responses/communication at *The Osterley Times* or *Think Progress*
    - Both have impersonal titles
    - One has rotating writers and *Osterley Times* blogger is unknown

# Results

- One-way communication
  - Rare blogger response in commentary
  - Questions apparently rhetorical  
Crooks and Liars: “He is kidding, isn’t he?”  
259 responses, 8 directed to Amato, no response

# Results

- One-way communication
- Questions clearly rhetorical
  - Oliver Willis: “What, no Rush?” in response to reading list of church shooter
  - Think Progress: “Does McCain speak for McCain on affirmative action?”
- Guides audience to ‘obvious’ conclusions

# Results

- One-way communication
- Selected text not resembling a conversation
- Asymmetrical communication rights
- Eminent blogger status

**250** [John Amato](#) Says:

[Alex @ 230:](#)

*Um, John, I suspected all along you supported Hillary in the primaries. Now your true colors are at last emerging.*

I didn't endorse anyone because I thought I could be more credible moving forward after the primary and supporting progressive ideals. Did you forget John Edwards already? I do want to get health care passed. So your comment is totally off base. And I seem to remember that Chuck Hagel scores like a zero when it comes to supporting "choice." That might not be important to you. He was good with the war and spoke out against Cheney, but he voted with Bush all the time.

July 27th, 2008 at 10:15 PM - PDT

[Quote This Comment](#)

**251** [John Amato](#) Says:

[hello @ 241:](#)

[Peter G @ 235:](#)

[Alex @ 230:](#)

*Um, John, I suspected all along you supported Hillary in the primaries. Now your true colors are at last emerging.*

*"She can stay in those three states as far as I'm concerned" is not exactly a ringing endorsement but it is a very realistic one. This blog showed admirable restraint during those tense primary days. If you think that this post shows a bias then I think he's earned the right.*

*I agree! My esteem for this blog went up tenfold during the primaries.*

Thank you so much. I received hundreds of emails like that.

July 27th, 2008 at 10:18 PM - PDT

[Quote This Comment](#)

# Results

- Caustic commentary
  - Occasional insight
  - Scorn, cynicism, mockery, general obnoxiousness
    - The Osterley Times:  
kel: “McCain is a fool”
    - Crooks and Liars  
Leftside Annie: “I hope Jesus comes and raptures  
his evil old ass STAT”
    - Oliver Willis:  
Jay: “Christ, you are stupid”

# Results

- Caustic commentary
  - One or two commentators as focus of derision
  - Think Progress
    - shoeless: “How long until Daryll chimes in to express his admiration for the Moonie Times”
    - chocolate jesus: “Oh Daryll, where art thou?”

# Results

- Caustic commentary
  - Ability to post is radical departure from mainstream
  - Like-minded comments may facilitate community
  - But what kind of community?
    - Self assured, one dimensional and oppositional fighting front AKA democratic sphere?

# Results

- Coded language
  - Oliver Willis

“Pravda at Black Rock...CBS scrubs yet another one of McCain’s senior citizen gaffes from their coverage. Uncle Joe would be proud.”
  - The Osterley Times

“McCain appears to think that Czechoslovakia still exists”



# Results

- Coded language
  - Creates communication hierarchy
  - May unite community with shared referential experiences but also closes out potential readers
  - Rejects informational opportunities

# Results

- Personalization
  - The Osterley Times

“People living within the most powerful country in the world can have no idea of what it feels like for those of us who live outside it...we have watched, dumbfounded as (Bush) has been allowed to act as if the law is what he says it is. Our faith in America is shattered. And that is why we so wholeheartedly embrace Obama.”
  - Intertextual mix of populist lexical choices
  - Invokes community and intimacy

# Results

- Apathetic online participation
  - 1.1 percent of links to petition
  - No instances of meaningful calls to action
  - Think Progress
    - “Watch it”
    - “Read the rest of this story”

# Results

- Dependent reporting
  - Similar pattern of representation
    - Initial, oppositional opening  
*“It’s a sad day for McCain when even Joe Klein thinks he has gone too far...”*
    - Excerpted text from mainstream outlet  
*Joe Klein from Time Magazine*
    - Challenge to mainstream media coverage from opinion OR from mainstream source  
*“I expect McCain’s campaign to get more scurrilous as time goes on...”*

# Results

- Story redundancy
  - Typical day had 65% replication between blogs
  - “Colder blogs” more likely to have replicated stories



# Discussion

- Alternative qualities of blogs found:
  - Personalized reporting
  - Non commercial source
  - Platform for citizen voices

# Discussion

- ...but not 'alternative'
  - No meaningful invitations for communication
  - No traditions and values outside of mainstream practices
  - Similar hierarchy of access
  - Pack journalism
  - No resistance narratives
  - Dependence upon mainstream content

# Discussion

- Blogs arguing on behalf of one entrenched power over the other
- Bloggers' critiques *and* solutions depended upon existence of established power structures
- Blogs perhaps as an overlapping sphere between mainstream and alternative, but extending and drawing upon mainstream practices
- Re-mediation of mainstream news may actually serve to strengthen, rather than weaken elite, mainstream views



# Discussion

- Subversion of mainstream skills and techniques  
(Atton, 2002; Downing 2001) not found
- These blogs make no attempt to create alternative identities outside of entrenched, mainstream, elite systems of power
- Blogs critique mainstream media within mainstream ideology with mainstream practices and sources
- End result is somewhat akin to mainstream ombudsman, but answering individual interests

# Limitations

- Findings can only be applied to case study at hand
- All blogs are not made equal
- Interviews with bloggers may help to understand blogger motivations and individual perceptions of blogging as 'mainstream' or 'alternative'